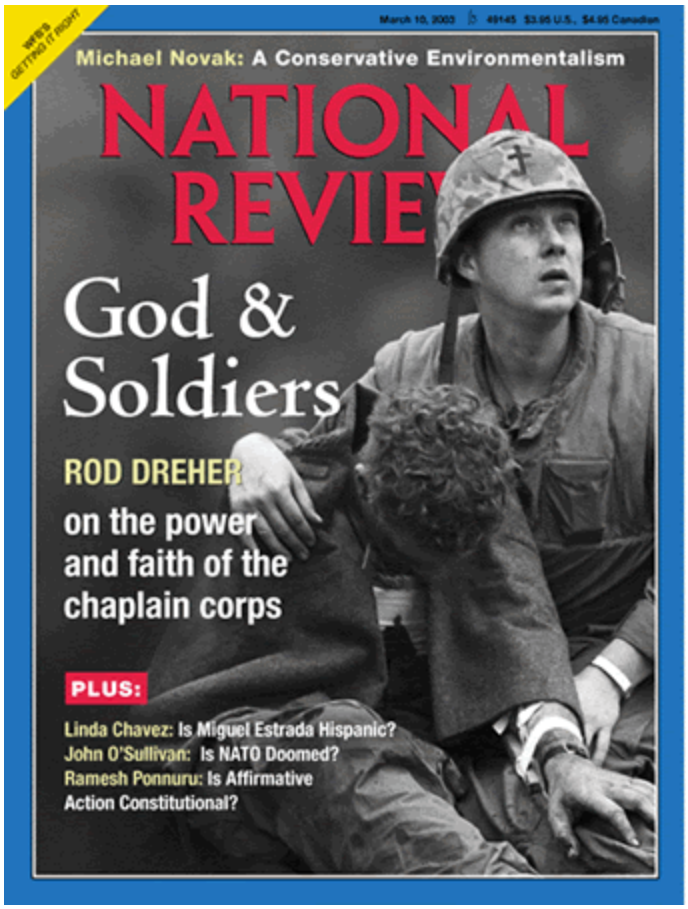

Ministers of War
The amazing chaplaincy of the U.S. military.
By Rod Dreher

The shooting had long since stopped by the time Richard Kent arrived for his tour of peacekeeping duty in Bosnia. But what the American soldier saw in an abandoned warehouse in a village called Kravica still haunts his dreams.

Eight years before Kent's arrival, Serbian forces crammed a thousand Bosnian Muslim men into the warehouse, where, according to the United Nations' official report, they were "killed by small arms fire and grenades. Visiting the Kravica warehouse several months later, United Nations personnel were able to see hair, blood and human tissue caked to the inside walls of this building." By the time Kent and his fellow soldiers saw the building, it was being used to store tractors and manure. The only sign of the barn's past was a black mold covering the walls, feeding off the rotting human flesh and blood embedded in its crevices.

Kent went to Bosnia a devout Catholic, but nothing they taught him in catechism class back in Michigan prepared him for that moldy barn in Kravica. "When evil of this magnitude is encountered, simple piety is not enough," Kent says today, from his home in northern Virginia. "Why does a God who has protected me, a soldier, through dangers large and small - where was He when the men murdered in this warehouse screamed for His mercy? Why has He allowed genocide?"

It is at this point, when the cruelty that a soldier has witnessed threatens to overwhelm his understanding and devour his soul, that he may go in search of a chaplain. Dave Peterson, a Presbyterian minister and retired Army colonel who served as a top chaplain in Operation Desert Storm, says the gruesome slaughter of fleeing Iraqi troops on the so-called "highway of death" back to Baghdad devastated many Americans who fought in that battle. "We had chaplains talking to some of those troops for a significant amount of time after the fact," Peterson says. "A significant number of troops just broke down after that. It left a mark, it really did."

If most people think of military chaplains at all, the image that comes to mind is kindly but slightly befuddled Father Mulcahy, from M*A*S*H. In fact, the more dangerous the mission, the more vital chaplains are to its success.

The nearly 1,400 chaplains in the U.S. armed forces - nearly all Christian, except for about 30 Jewish and 15 Muslim clergy - must be on-the-spot counselors to men and women living through a kind of trauma that few civilians will ever experience. They prepare soldiers to kill and to die without losing their souls. They help soldiers re-integrate into the lives of their families. Chaplains ministering stateside help military families left behind get through months of emotional and sometimes financial hardship.

And, most important, on the battlefield they serve as a sign of the presence of the just and good God in the midst of hell on earth. Chaplains work on or very close to the front, and do so unarmed. To soldiers under fire, the chaplain's presence is a sign that God has not abandoned them. A chaplain's importance to the morale of combat soldiers is so central that if his courage falters during fighting, commanders must immediately replace him, or risk the collapse of the entire unit. The things soldiers in combat are asked to do and to suffer are so extreme that, in many cases, only a belief that God is with them enables them to endure.

"Courage is really fear that's said its prayers," says Father Vincent J. Inghilterra, a top Army colonel and Catholic priest who has been a military chaplain for 34 years. "The truth is, there's no way we can do anything without a deep spiritual life and dependence on God. When you're a soldier, you are there alone, you're very mortal, you have a mission and you don't know if you're going to survive. We chaplains bring the presence of God into every situation, so that wherever our soldiers find themselves, they are not devoid of God."

Talking to these men, one is struck by their moral realism, and how starkly it contrasts with the effete sentimentality you find among so many clergymen today. Theirs is a sterner faith, a manlier piety than mainstream America is accustomed to. It has to be, because the world beyond our shores is filled with hot, cruel places, lands where a faith that has had its moral backbone turned to aspic by our decadent, Oprah-cized culture cannot hope to survive. U.S. troops aren't the only Americans who could stand to hear the testimony of military chaplains in these dire days.

AN AMERICAN TRADITION

The presence of religious leaders among armies is an ancient custom. The Bible records that the Israelites brought their priests with them into battle. The Romans did as well, and had their pagan priests perform ritual sacrifices and read auguries from animal entrails on the eve of battle. The word "chaplain" derives from the early Christian era. In the 4th century, a Roman soldier, Martin of Tours, is said to have divided his military cloak and given half to a beggar he found shivering in the cold. That night, he had a mystical vision in which he saw that the beggar was actually Jesus Christ. After converting to Christianity, Martin became a devout churchman, and when he died, he was canonized, becoming a patron saint of France. The Frankish kings would carry St. Martin's cloak - called in Latin cappa – into battle as a holy relic. The priest who cared for the cloak was called a cappellanus, and ultimately all priests who served the military were called cappellani. The French translation was chapelains, which is where the English word comes from.

The Middle Ages produced a number of sword-bearing warrior-priests, but by the Renaissance, chaplains played chiefly a non-combatant role in the military. In 1775, the Continental Congress gave birth to the military chaplaincy in the United States when it instituted a paid chaplaincy for the army. “The blessing and protection of Heaven are at all times necessary, but especially so in times of public distress and danger,” George Washington wrote on July 9, 1776, approving the decision. Piety continued to be a tradition in American military ranks.

Some of the most celebrated and beloved soldiers in American history were chaplains. Father Francis P. Duffy of the Fighting 69th worked for two days straight during a battle, tending the sick and the dying, and emerged as one of World War I’s legendary figures. During World War II, the “Four Chaplains” - a rabbi, a Catholic priest, and two Protestant ministers – died heroically when their troop transport ship was torpedoed in the north Atlantic. The chaplains calmly distributed life jackets to soldiers abandoning the sinking ship, and when the supply was gone, each chaplain removed his own life jacket to give to a young soldier. The four went down with the ship, in prayer, and were later celebrated for their sacrifice, and interreligious brotherhood, by a special congressional medal struck in their honor.

In more recent times, Father Vincent Capodanno, a beloved Marine lieutenant who was killed ministering to his men during a firefight in Vietnam, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Though his right hand had been nearly severed in the battle, Capodanno would not leave the battlefield, and died there. “Everywhere I go in the military, people know about Father Capodanno,” says Father Daniel Mode, a Navy chaplain and biographer of the “Grunt Padre.” “I’ve met almost a hundred of the guys who served with him. They remember so many details about him, and the physical expressions they use when they talk about him tell you that he had an amazing impact on their lives.”

When you talk to military chaplains about why they chose this relatively rare vocation, you inevitably find a special love for soldiers, sailors, and military life, as well as a missionary hunger to be a witness for God in extreme life-or-death situations. You will also often hear Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German evangelical pastor martyred by the Nazis after they learned of his role in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler, invoked as a role model. “He rejected a comfortable appointment in America to go back to Germany during the Nazi persecutions,” says Army chaplain Timothy Mallard.

“He said he’d have no moral right to stand with his people after the war if he didn’t stand with them now. I feel that way too.”

Chaplains in today’s military have to have a master’s degree in divinity, or the equivalent, and two years of ministerial experience in a church, synagogue, or mosque before they are considered for active duty. “They come to us as civilians right off the street,” says Chaplain Brent Causey, a senior instructor at the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School at Fort Jackson, S.C. “We tell them to come in physical shape, but some are better off than others. Our responsibility is to make sure in three months they can pass an Army physical-fitness test. We teach them all the same skills a soldier needs, except for how to fire a weapon.”

There is intense preparation for counseling, and learning how to minister to soldiers who are not part of the chaplain’s own religious tradition. And then there is the matter of learning how to prepare soldiers spiritually for death - and for the task of killing others. To many clergy outside the military, an ordained minister helping a man get comfortable with taking another man’s life is a betrayal of the clerical mission. Military chaplains, however, understand that in a fallen and imperfect world, war (to quote Gen. Colin Powell) should be a last resort, but it should be a resort. (“If we’re not going to war with a tear in our eyes and our hearts broken, we aren’t coming at it from the right place,” one chaplain told me.) This is what they tell the troops. They also give them a theological grounding in just-war theory, which attempts to set out conditions under which violence, even killing, is the morally responsible thing to do.

“Two things are necessary to prepare soldiers to apprehend or kill,” says Navy chaplain Eric Verhulst. “They must believe [the enemy combatant] is indeed a threat to the United States - to peace - and that killing him is therefore necessary in order to protect other lives; and that they are not personally connected with [the enemy combatant], but are acting solely as disinterested agents of the state. One person killing another over personal issues is murder. A soldier, in uniform, as the designated representative of his government, acting on behalf of a nation to remove a threat to that nation’s peace and security - that is war.”

In truth, pacifist-minded soldiers are scarce in the volunteer military. Most troops accept that war, and all it entails, can be just. What they most want from chaplains is the assurance that, come what may, God will be there with them; if they don’t come back alive, that the sacrifice will have been worth it; and that there’s something better waiting for them on the other side. “That stuff sounds like a cliché, but it’s true,” says Chaplain Maurice Campbell. “Karl Barth wrote volumes and volumes of systematic theology, and at the end of his life, he was asked what he learned. He simply said, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know.’”

In the field, chaplains face serious challenges helping soldiers coping with stress and loneliness stay morally straight. Retired chaplain Dave Peterson, whose first tour of duty was in Vietnam, says the bitter experience of that war taught him that command leadership has to establish conditions that make it easier for troops to live up to high standards of behavior: “I concluded that one reason we can’t get past the Vietnam experience is because so many people broke their moral code, and got into sex and drugs and things like that. America lost part of its soul in Vietnam. There was bad leadership.”

Serving on Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf’s staff in Desert Storm, Peterson helped the general draft the Islamic-sensitive code of conduct strictly forbidding drugs, alcohol, pornography, and prostitution among Desert Storm forces. Despite this - in fact, he believes, because of it - Peterson says he has never seen troop morale higher.

WARRIORS FOR JUSTICE

It has not escaped the notice of men and women in uniform that quite a number of religious leaders in civilian life have been outspoken opponents of war against Saddam Hussein. None of the chaplains with whom I spoke would directly criticize their anti-war civilian colleagues. Yet some did say the clerical pacifism leaves many soldiers angry, confused, betrayed, and even spiteful toward faith. “These pronouncements tend to reinforce the notion that religion is for wimps, for prissy-pants, for frilly-suited morons – and those are among the more gentle statements I hear,” says Chaplain Verhulst. “It frustrates me, because I know that notion is false, but all I can do is provide a counter-example.”

As men and women of faith deliberate the morality of war with Iraq, it is a travesty that more of them haven’t had the perspective of military chaplains, that virtually the only religious voices heard in the public square are coming from the anti-war corner. The divide between military and civilian clergy over the Iraq war is philosophically very deep. It cuts to the core of one’s belief in evil, and the nature of human beings. Military clergy who have been with American troops in war ones have seen a side of humanity that bishops in well-appointed chanceries and pastors sitting in suburban middle-class comfort, pondering therapeutic approaches to the mystery of iniquity, never see. This is what Philip M. Hannan, the retired Catholic archbishop of New Orleans and a World War II military chaplain, was getting at last fall when he criticized his fellow American bishops for their pacifist pronouncements on the Iraq war. Hannan, 89, who was with G.I.’s when they liberated two concentration camps, remarked at the time that the bishops had no experience with tyranny, and had no idea how to cope with it.

“I’ve stared into the face of evil,” says Chaplain Inghilterra, who will soon take over as chief chaplain for U.S. armed forces in Europe and the Middle East. “We [chaplains] have actually seen the oppression, the devastation, the hopelessness, the absolutely inexplicable, irrational hatred a person can have against another human being. It astounds me. But evil definitely exists, and

what we are dealing with in this [Middle East] situation is evil. There's only one way to deal with that kind of evil, and that's to confront it, with force if necessary."

Some of the chaplains say the failure of contemporary American society to grasp the true nature of the evil we face means the country is spiritually unprepared for war and its sacrifices. The civilian clergy is not particularly helpful on this point. "There are a lot of people living in denial, even though right now there are Humvees with Stinger missiles patrolling Washington," says one experienced chaplain. "The battlefront is now here at home. And it's going to get worse before it gets better."

Military clergy have been dealing with this chasm in understanding with their civilian counterparts since at least the Vietnam era. When Father Capodanno, a Maryknoll priest, returned from a year spent ministering on the battlefields of southeast Asia, his fellow Maryknollers greeted him with indifference at best and scorn at worst. "They didn't want to hear about it. They didn't know, and they didn't want to know, because they were anti-war," says Chaplain Mode, Capodanno's biographer. "Father Capodanno immediately wanted to go back and be with his men." This bond of brotherhood forged in extreme hardship is intensely strong. There is only one word for it: love. You can hear it in the voices of chaplains who have ministered in combat zones. When Chaplain Inghilterra talks about America's soldiers as "the hope and glory of our nation," it's not patriotic cant. He was present during Desert Storm when an Iraqi Scud missile killed "28 of my kids," and he immediately went to work. "One kid was holding on to me. Basically he was gone, he wasn't going to survive. He was just holding on to me. For this kid, I represented the presence of God. I consoled him, I anointed him, I prayed for him."

The old chaplain's voice cracks. "I've seen about 75 kids on the threshold of eternity. That keeps me motivated, because I'm concerned about eternal life. These are our best kids. Freedom is taken for granted in this country, but they are the ones who make it possible for us to have freedom. They are our very best. They willingly offer themselves as a sacrifice for the rest of us. To me, being willing to sacrifice is at the heart of what it means to be a soldier."

And, he could have said but did not, a chaplain.